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ABSTRACT

This digest addresses the sometimes confrontational nature of decision making in the language arts. Pointing out that administrators are often thrust into the debate even when they do not want to be, the digest offers a set of principles for an educational philosophy that gives both the community and the learners a stake in the content and process of learning. The digest also discusses the type of school environment that is best for providing students with real learning experiences and the role of educators in encouraging children to learn language arts in a natural way. (NKA)

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Decision Making in the Language Arts

by Carl B. Smith

When education seems to be in the midst of a change, decision making is often confrontational. Almost any decision brings conflict. Even if the administrator makes no decision and lets the staff drift with the current, conflict will arise, for teachers and parents who want change to be mandated and directed will cry for action. Thus the administrator is thrust into the midst of the debate over change, even if he or she doesn't want to be there.

When making decisions in language arts, an administrator can be guided by a set of tenets for curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Bush, 1994; Sanacore, 1993). The following principles represent a philosophy that gives both the community and the learner a stake in the content and in the process of learning:

- The language arts curriculum needs to represent community culture and the individual interests of students. The community expects schools to transmit culture through literature and to develop fluency in reading and writing sufficient for employment and independent learning. The personal interests of students open up an unlimited array of topics and directions to explore beyond the community curriculum.
- In literature and in communication skills the language arts curriculum needs coherence and a sequence that enables teachers and students to have a sense of direction and a sense of progress across the years.
- Both the community and individual students want language arts assessment to give them an estimate of performance on communication processes and on communication skills and products.
- The assessment of reading and writing needs to represent as closely as possible the acts of reading and writing in their natural states. Assessment for administrative purposes may be different from assessment for individual conference purposes.
- Children need to know how to approach books strategically and thoughtfully.
- Strategic thinking (comprehension) relies on knowledge and practice for fluency and reasonable performance.
- Many reading and communication skills should be learned gradually through the child's literacy environment. Schools should deliberately surround children with all kinds of literacy experiences as one productive means for developing skills and strategies that serve common sense communication needs (Bromley, 1992).
- Students need to develop the attitude that they are the ones who build meaning in the process of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. They are the responsible agents who must actively pursue meaning through their responses to literature, their organization of thoughts, their selections of words for images when they speak or write.
- Standards for communication arise from excellent literature and from the models presented to the students. Students need opportunities to analyze, reflect, and practice the language models presented to them (Hennings, 1997).

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Real-Life Communication

A nagging issue in determining curriculum and in choosing literature is the place of nonfiction in the curriculum. Quite understandably, fiction and personal responses to fiction are the substance of the interest-centered approach. Books and personal experiences that involve adventure and high emotion are the stuff of personal interest. This is why the typical elementary school child spends approximately 30 hours per week watching television—adventure and high emotion. But in the child's world of study, and in the adult world of work and information, nonfictional material is more often required reading.

When students need to study, to find information, or to apply information to solving problems, they need skills and metacognitive strategies that are different from the emotional responses and the reality testing

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they use in reading fiction (Doiron, 1995). Study reading, information rocessing, and organizing for problem solving are important life skills that may not develop spontaneously if children are left to pursue only their self-defined interests.

The School Environment

Many of the issues in language arts seem to revolve around the question of the effectiveness of the environment as the primary teacher of literacy and communication skills. If children are placed in a school environment that is filled with high-interest books and offers them multiple opportunities to communicate their ideas and feelings, will they thereby learn the language skills, the thinking strategies, the study skills, and the cultural information that they need for a successful life? Will their own interests and an adult advisor (teacher) lead them to succeed in school, enter college, or perform satisfactorily as workers in an information age? The stakes are high, aren't they?

Viewing the issue from the opposite perspective, the questions are similar. If children are placed in an environment where the curriculum objectives are the prearranged presentation of cultural literature and the practice of skills that are needed to study and to use information, will they attend well enough to these objectives and apply sufficient energy to them to learn and to succeed later at work outside of school?

This discussion does not preclude a school from mixing interests with a prearranged curriculum (Hirsch, 1993). But then the job becomes more complex. And those who hold tightly to a particular philosophy will bemoan the prostitution of their beliefs.

In an ideal world, all learning would flow naturally from the curiosity of a learner. In this ideal world, boys and girls would see the moon appear in various shapes and would ask why. On their own, they would make monthly observations, draw diagrams, read books that explain the phenomenon, and study the observations of others. Then they would write a summary of their findings so that others could benefit from their experience (see, for example, Chancer and Rester-Zodrow, 1997). All learning would occur in this way, one question and answer leading to another, all subjects open to constant exploration in a perfectly integrated learning process.

There would be no schools in this world. Who would need schools when all learning is naturally prompted and entirely integrated? We have schools because we do not live in an ideal world. The knowledge needed to thrive in modern society is increasingly abstract and dependent on previous learning, and society requires regular evidence that children are moving systematically toward intellectual adulthood. Even so, the vision of the curious learner who experiences knowledge in a functional, integrated way should be encouraged in whatever manner modern schools permit (Argo, 1995; Carroll, 1993). If we can create a school environment in which children work with classmates to search for answers, we are helping them view learning as a natural and valuable community experience.

We should strive to encourage children to learn language arts in a natural way. As educators, it is our job to instill in children the desire to learn language and modes of communication and to develop thinking skills. If we are doing our job well, our students will read well written fiction and nonfiction because they believe that doing so enriches their lives by helping them communicate effectively and opening up their minds to new and diverse ideas. If we strive for this ideal, I believe we can improve language arts learning and instruction.

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